

Sabbatical Officer Reports

July to October

dimitri cautain, Co-President Welfare and Campaigns

Over the past summer months there has been a lot of organising, learning and frustration for myself. Having participated in a number of mildly (at most) exciting conferences about UK-wide student politics, I'm very excited to see many students back at SOAS. We desperately need to all step up and revitalise the student movement to take up issues at their core.

I feel we organised a very successful Freshers' Fortnight, thanks to all the tireless commitment of volunteers and activists who contributed great time and energy to guiding new students around SOAS and organising powerful workshops and events.

Regarding some of our priorities this year;

1) We have been doing a lot of fire-fighting with the Enough is Enough campaign against rape culture at SOAS. With the work of all the facilitators we managed to run a successful manual registration stall. We've also revamped the SU Welfare Contact programme; so we now have a team of Welfare Contacts who can support you and your society, campaign, team or other group of students when you are putting on an event or party where you feel it is necessary to have Welfare Contacts there to create a Safer Space for those attending your event.

2) One of our key priorities this year is to improve the working conditions of all staff and students. As many of you will have seen, the SOAS Justice For Workers finally overturned Management's ideological commitment to outsourcing. As opposed to the self-congratulatory e-mail sent out by SOAS Managers to all staff and all students, the SOAS Justice For Workers' August statement reminds us well that we still have a lot of work to do! This year is a crucial year for the campaign to be alert, strong and unwavering in its commitment to end outsourcing as soon as feasible.

As part of this priority, we are also working to encourage students who are also working to join trade unions and start challenging exploitative practices in the workplace. Our concern for you as students living in an expensive city is also about challenging the processes (precarity, gentrification, etc.) which

make London everyday more inhospitable for many of us, our families and our communities.

3) Finally, another campaign we are slowly picking up this year is the Free Education campaign, as [I've mentioned already](#). This is tied to the Democratise SOAS campaign here at SOAS, as we are also challenging how universities are run in this marketised environment. Watch out for more to come, especially the Student Staff Forum which happening next week Wednesday 18th September, 4PM in the Senate House Atrium.

A lot of our part-time officers are also up to great work, and I look forward to working with them to improve the support that SOAS can provide from students, including everything from mental wellbeing services for liberation groups and emergency and necessary financial support. I encourage you all to speak up, directly to me, or in other ways about SOAS' shortcomings in providing you with the support you need.

Halimo Hussain, Co-President Equality and Liberation

It's been an incredibly busy but exciting start to the term. All the training that we had at the start of the summer hasn't really prepared us some of the things that have arised during our time in the SU, like students we are constantly still learning and growing in our efforts to have a fully functioning and democrat SU.

There are numerous key things that I have been focusing on since the summer, namely these things relate to improving the university experience for liberation groups. As such i have been working on setting up a BME mentorship scheme. This is in collaboration with Carol John who works in Students Advice and Wellbeing, It's also the continuation of the work that was started by last years Co-president of Welfare and Campaigns Ayesha Abbasi. The scheme is for all BME students, however, there is a key focus on African and Caribbean students, this is due to the fact that they are the most affected group by the attainment gap. We are in the process of matching mentors with mentees, however if anyone is still interested in taking part in the scheme please feel free to email me to register interest.

In addition to the BME mentorship scheme, I have been working to implement positionality workshops at SOAS. The workshops focus on interactions that

take place in the classroom and embraces a decolonial approach to incorporating positionality and lived experience. Therefore, the workshops encourage students and staff to critically engage with their own positionalities and that of the reading material. They demonstrate how to approach theory and discussions with sensitivity and open a space for constructive and considerate dialogue between students and staff as peers. We hope this approach will reduce microaggressions that can render the classroom environment unsafe. We believe that the implementation of such workshops will work towards addressing the attainment gap.

One of the main platforms I ran on during the elections was Decolonising SOAS and fighting for a decolonial university. Last year a draft vision was made by the decolonising working group which set out an aims for the decolonising project. We are currently waiting to get this vision approved by academic board this month. After this happens I'm going to be spending time on bringing this vision to life, some of the concrete things we've got planned for the year are positionality workshops as already mentioned and a big decolonial international conference that will be hosted at SOAS next year. Also in relation to decolonising work taking place we have incorporated a decolonising SOAS workshop into the student rep training so that student reps have a general understanding of the campaign that can enable them to feel confident in influencing the content of courses and pushing for a more decolonial and representative education.

A lot of time and energy was spent these past few months on planning for freshers with the other co-presidents. There were a plethora of events that ranged in diversity to ensure that all students felt like they had something they could go to and enjoy. Some of the events that i helped to organise was a poetry night, radical crafternoon, the social justice fayre as well as the liberation caucuses that were running in the first week. Also it's currently BHM which is mainly being organised by the POC officer, one event that i spent a lot of time organising happened yesterday, it was a Q and A with Kelela which centred black queer female perspectives. I hope to ensure that we continue to run more events like this alongside doing the important work of strengthening campaigns at SOAS and making sure that we have a strong and engaged student community.

Mehdi Baraka, Co-President Activities and Events

Since starting the role in July, it's fair to say I've had one of the most thrilling and exhausting three months of my life. I write this not to make this report personal, but simply to offer an insight into the realities and challenges of being in this role.

Majority of my time has been consumed by the organising and facilitating of Freshers Fortnight. This year we managed to put on over 170 different events over a two week period which severely tested our resolve and capacity as a Union. The main highlight of this was the Official Freshers Party which was a ticketed event. This event plays a very prominent role in shaping the Entertainment calendar for the year as revenues made from the night are used for all the different events and performances we organise at SOAS. I'm pleased to say the event brought in a profit of just under £4000 (there are still some invoices going through so it is not the final figure). I am including this in my report as I ran on a platform of increasing awareness of the Union's financial situations and also because I feel it is a crucial part to holding the officers to account.

Furthermore, I have spent a lot of time this summer on facilitating for Society Presidents Training which has been revamped. Unlike previous years, I argued to have this training in the start of the year in order to ensure that societies use it as an opportunity to network and collaborate before Term starts. In addition, it was done so early in order to prevent a lot of the issues that societies face during the year (from a technical aspect; room bookings & budgets) to be resolved from the start by setting a clear and coherent policy that is followed from the start. We have managed to train just under 100 different societies and aim to complete the training for all societies in SOAS by the end of Friday 22nd October. The ultimate aim of such training is to instill in leaderships structures of our student led societies the confidence and required skill sets to promote their society and share with the rest of the SOAS community their love and passion of each of their respected cause/activity.

The final aspect I want to touch on is my work with regards to the Schools Estate Strategy which is being revised based on the new focus of the Student Experience. My aim for this is to campaign and strategize for more SU space which is open to all societies and students to book and host events in. This aspect of my work is more likely to take up my whole year at SOAS and so expect to see more open forums and emails sent with regards to space at SOAS and how to best utilise it in order to ensure that students are benefitting.

Nisha Phillipps, Co-President Democracy and Education

There are several key campaigns and projects I hoped to develop over summer in preparation for the new academic year. This included revitalising the student rep system, reviewing governance within the Students' Union and re-vamping the fight for free education. Working on these projects over the summer was also accompanied by organising a freshers programme with the other co-presidents and tackling new developments within SOAS. As we prioritised freshers and hosting events, some of the campaigns are not quite at the place I would have hoped for.

That being said, working with Antonia (research and representation coordinator), the Academic Affairs officers (Hamish and Blanca) and the other co-presidents, we have made a lot of progress on the revamping of the student rep system. This has included a re-imaging of the rep training. We lobbied the school for funding, and secured £2,500 to pay facilitators to carry out the new rep training. We recruited facilitators from previous student reps. The new rep training is aimed at ensuring reps are in a stronger position to represent students and work collectively to enact positive change. The training includes engaging activities and workshops on decolonising SOAS, creating action plans and self- and collective-care. In addition to developing this training, we have looked to provide better support for student reps by the addition of a 'Log an Issue' section on the website. Reps will be able to register an issue with the Students' Union that is guaranteed a response within 24 hours by either the Co-President Democracy and Education, the Academic Affairs' Officers or the Research and Representation Coordinator. After the training on the 21st of October I'm going to be focusing on the reps workshops we will be running over the course of the year on alternative assessment, decolonising the curriculum and restructuring.

This year I will also be prioritising the fight for a free education. In addition to the ongoing national campaign to scrap tuition fees, the Students' Union will be raising awareness across the SOAS community about marketisation and the impact that this government agenda is having. Over the year we will work with the SOAS community and other universities to develop effective ways of not simply opposing but undermining and proposing alternatives to the government's marketisation agenda. I will be reaching out to other universities in order to develop a strong network and national voice to shape and discuss the future of the university.

I will also be looking to improve transparency around the hidden costs of education at SOAS. I will work with the other co-presidents and the international students officer to fight for an end to uncapped international students fees, which are currently subject to rising over the course of a student's time at SOAS. We will work to ensure that the school brings an end

to installment fees, continuing the campaign launched by the postgraduate taught student officers in 2016/17. Finally I will work with the Academic Affairs officers to look into alternatives to the library fines system as we hope to ensure that students are not overburdened with debt, but also continue to respect the value of the library as a resource for our community.

In terms of governance within the Students' Union, there are a number of changes I hope to make over the course of the year. I want to ensure that caucuses are able to meet up more regularly. I would also like to open up for discussion within liberation groups the potential of passing motions in caucuses. I would also like to work to make UGMs more engaging and a less hostile environment for students. This is something I believe needs input from the whole student body. If you are interested in feeding into these changes please do not hesitate to contact me.